

FROM A DISTANCE
Good Friday—April 10, 2020
Matthew 27:55

A sign at a pharmacy counter reads,
*“Out of respect for the privacy of our patients,
please keep back some distance while patient counseling is in progress.”*

Driver training manuals advise,
*“Always maintain a safe distance between your vehicle
and the one in front of you.”*

And we have the phenomenon of “social distancing,”
maintaining the recommended six feet between ourselves and others.

In many ways, distance equals safety.

Safety concerns may explain the remark Matthew makes
about the crucifixion scene outside Jerusalem:

“There were also many women there, looking on from a distance” (Mt 27:55).

The mob with its clubs and swords
had already gotten too close for comfort to the disciples
on Thursday evening at Gethsemane.

The Gospel writers note that all of them fled,
but they also note that Peter did follow the mob
to the chief priest’s house—*at a distance* (Mt 26:58).

A concern for personal safety kept the Twelve at a distance.

They certainly didn’t wish to be caught
and suffer the same fate as their master,
even though they’d all sworn loyalty to the end!

Issues of comfort also keep people at a distance.

We don’t feel comfortable when aggressive people
invade our personal space in conversation,

forcing us to retreat a step at a time until our backs are against the wall.

Even in church, some find sitting in the front rows too close for comfort.

Perhaps a verse from Psalm 88 holds another reason
why the women watched Jesus die from a distance:

**“You have caused my companions to shun me;
you have made me a horror to them”** (Ps 88:8).

Who but the most twisted
would actually relish approaching the scene of a bloody crucifixion,
especially of a friend, and find its details pleasant and fascinating?

Who would feel comfortable watching their teacher, stripped naked, die cruelly before their eyes?

These two issues—comfort and safety—come together on Good Friday to explain the matter of distance.

Once, after Jesus instructed the disciples where they could find a catch of fish and they did, Peter replied, **“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord”** (Lk 5:8).

Isn't it sin which always puts distance between us and others?

How quickly would you rush to the hospital bed of a friend whom your drunk driving nearly killed?

What makes us keep our distance is our own discomfort with the part we've played in the tragedy.

And that's what causes people to keep their distance from the cross too. Jesus **“was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities”** (Is 53:5).

The crucifixion gives the lie to our notions of *“petty crime.”*

It warns us how serious all of our transgressions are.

Here's the man who gave his life to pay the steep consequences for all the times you and I have thought,

“Oh, this little lie isn't that serious!

It's not like murder or anything as repulsive as that!”

Yet even lies are symptoms of the sinner's need to hide from the truth.

The drunk husband sneaked up the stairs quietly.

He looked in the bathroom mirror and bandaged the bumps and bruises he'd received in a fight earlier that night.

He then proceeded to climb into bed, smiling at the thought that he'd pulled one over on his wife.

When morning came, he opened his eyes, and there stood his wife.

“You were drunk last night, weren't you?”

“No, honey,” he responds.

“Well, if you weren't,

then why did you put all the Band-Aids on the bathroom mirror?”

It's this ongoing denial of our sins

out of fear that separates us from God.

Jesus died for all people.

Jesus died for all sins.

Yet some continue to watch from a distance

because they know who should be nailed to that tree instead.

Jesus understands this reluctance to draw close to his Father.
He understands the ironic emptiness this reluctance creates too.

For even though we often maintain a distance
for our own safety and comfort,
we hate having to experience that dreadful gulf
that separates from what our hearts desire most—*fellowship with God*.

The kind of fellowship with God Adam and Eve experienced,
walking with God in the garden in the cool of the evening.

We wish something could be done to lessen the distance,
but we find ourselves unable to bridge the gulf.

Now anyone who believes that keeping our distance from God
is a mutually-agreed upon strategy is sadly mistaken.

The spiritual gulf that stood between us and God disturbed him.
He took no pleasure in driving Adam and Eve from the garden.

He wasn't thrilled

about having to stop taking leisurely walks in the garden alongside them.

He wasn't pleased when the Israelites said to Moses,
*"You go up on the mountain and listen to God for us;
we'll stay down here because we fear for our lives."*

It gave him no joy

to strike dead those who touched the ark of the covenant.

How he would have rather appeared to Israel
without a pillar of fire or cloud.

But only he had the power
to do something about the distance that separates us from him.

For that reason Jesus experienced that damning distance
when his Father distanced himself from him on the cross.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46).

At that moment, Jesus Christ suffered hell—separation from God—
so that we might not suffer the same fate
as the rich man standing in hell, looking up from the great chasm
that separated him from Lazarus in heaven.

With the expiration of that last breath,

Jesus closed the distance in an unexpected way.

Jesus suffered upon the cross

to close the distance between us and His Father.

He breathes his last with the satisfaction of knowing
that our having to keep our distance from God is finished.

Now the invitation often spoken
at the beginning of some of our worship services takes on new meaning:
**“Let us draw near with a true heart
and confess our sins unto God our Father”** (LSB, p. 184).

We can draw near and confess our sins
because Jesus has removed all reasons
for us keeping our distance from God and He from us.

In the parable known to most as the parable of the prodigal son,
the waiting father runs out to embrace the wayward son
because he’s forgiven him.

We have peace with God now,
and the gulf between us has been bridged.

So as the author of Hebrews says,
we can **“with confidence draw near to the throne of grace”** (Heb 4:16).

Yes, BECAUSE JESUS’ SUFFERING AND DEATH ON THE CROSS PAID FOR OUR SINS,
WE CAN WITH CONFIDENCE DRAW NEAR TO THE THRONE OF GRACE
AND RECEIVE THE BENEFITS OF FORGIVENESS, LIFE, AND SALVATION HE GIVES.

Yes, Jesus is as near to us now
as the bread we eat and the wine we drink in Holy Communion.

And He tells us time and again of just how close He is
every time we recall our Baptism and we are reminded
that He has put His Name on us and made us His own.

And we rejoice that He has drawn us near
each and every time we hear these great words of assurance:
You are forgiven all of your sins
in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.